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INQUIRY

Topic: MEXICO

John Gavin, 52, was named by President Reagan as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in 1981. As ambassador, he is chief of one of the largest American diplomatic missions in the world, with more than 1,000 employes. Before his appointment, he worked as an actor, starring in numerous films and Broadway plays. Gavin was interviewed by USA TODAY's editorial staff.

John Gavin

TIMELINE: John Gavin

- **1932:** Born in Los Angeles.
- **1952:** Received a B.A. in economics from Stanford University.
- **1952-1956:** Commissioned in the United States Navy and served in the Korean theater as an air intelligence officer; also served in Latin America.
- **1956-1980:** Worked as a film actor; his films include *A Time to Live, A Time to Die; Psycho; Spartacus; Romanoff and Juliet; Midnight Lace; Backstreet; Thoroughly Modern Millie.*
- **1961-1973:** Was special adviser to the secretary general of the Organization of American States.
- **1971-1973:** Served as president of the Screen Actors Guild.
- **1981:** Appointed by President Reagan as U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

Source: *Who's Who in America*

We need law to halt illegal immigrant flow

USA TODAY: Is there anything we can do about illegal immigrants pouring over the border between the United States and Mexico?

GAVIN: I think we need a good law desperately. I would define a good law as a law that would protect the rights of workers — protect their human rights and protect them from being exploited. The Simpson-Mazzoli bill — the draft that I've seen — goes far in doing that.

USA TODAY: How can a law stop illegal immigration?

GAVIN: The point the legislation makes is that at the moment of employment, proof of the right to have that job would be required. There are a lot of other issues. There are a lot of people working illegally who pay money into Social Security — using numbers that they have snitched out of dead people's files. Social Security takes that money and keeps it, because they need it and they say that there's a legal reason why they can't blow the whistle.

USA TODAY: Is there general support in Mexico for this kind of legislation?

GAVIN: No. Mexicans, quite candidly, would rather that there were nothing done. The fact that the flow of illegals to the United States is a safety valve, for their labor and job situation is quite evident. There's no use trying to pussyfoot around that issue. There are, as you know, an estimated 6 million, 10 million illegals in the United States. We estimate also — again, we have no hard data — that there are probably $3 billion a year in remittances to Mexico from people working up here from that country. But this is a very difficult situation for Mexicans to deal with. They would rather export goods than labor.

USA TODAY: Is there a deep-seated anti-American sentiment in Mexico?

GAVIN: There's no question that there's a great deal of feeling about the United States and Mexico in a great many areas. But there's also no question that we have a great many friends in Mexico. That is the ultimate point. The problem is that those who are enemies of the United States are very vigorous, very energetic, very loud, and they follow the scapegoat theory of politics. For example, they blame us for too little rain and too much rain.

USA TODAY: Did the news about the CIA mining harbors in Nicaragua create an awkward situation for you diplomatically in Mexico?

GAVIN: Certain people in Mexico feel that the Sandinista revolution should be allowed to develop, and if it develops, it will inevitably develop towards the Mexican model, and that if you pressure, you will force them into the arms of the communists and the Russians, through their Cuban surrogates.

Continued

USA TODAY: Do you find that it's difficult for Mexican officials when the United States is carrying out a policy in Central America with which the Mexican government does not agree, particularly in such things as mining harbors?

GAVIN: I don't think it's right to assume that we were going to have unanimity of opinion on everything. We have differences of opinion on some of these things. We present them to each other in the context of friendship and mutual respect. I would consider it the worst kind of diplomacy and counterproductive to attempt to grab somebody by the throat and try to convince them that way. So what we do is we treat them candidly and frankly and consistently, and we try to persuade each other and reason with each other. But if we do not prevail, I might mourn it, but I don't think I'd consider that the world would come to an end.

USA TODAY: Do you think that we listen to Mexican leaders and use them in solving our problems in Central America?

GAVIN: I guarantee you that we're in communication. It's my job. We also try, in this communication through others, to get unanimity of opinion, and we do, indeed, have that when it comes to our goals in Central America. We have very different ideas about the avenues that we should pursue to reach these goals.

USA TODAY: Could you give us an example?

GAVIN: We feel strongly that the very serious problem in Central America is the Sandinistas, who have become a tyranny. What the people of Nicaragua have had is one tyrant replaced by another tyrant. The Nicaraguans are supporting revolution. They are supporting the guerrillas in El Salvador. They are supplying them arms. They're giving them sanctuary. The Nicaraguans have talked about giving their people freedoms that they didn't enjoy under Samosa. They guaranteed them these freedoms by declarations in 1979 before the Organization of American States. They have not given them those freedoms.

USA TODAY: Why can't we persuade the Sandinistas that they're doing the wrong thing instead of mining their harbors and blowing up their oil reserves?

GAVIN: I believe that was tried. It was tried considerably. As a matter of fact, right up to 1981 when we were giving assistance, we kept saying, "Why don't we go to the principles of 1979, before the OAS?" Then we presented a set of points; if they would have accepted, we would have started assistance again. I was there in May of last year and repeated these things in meetings that I had with representatives and members of the junta.

USA TODAY: It doesn't look like the *contras* are going to win. If the Sandinista government is so repressive, why don't we just send troops in there and restore democracy? Do you favor that?

GAVIN: You know, it's an interesting thing. I have had people from Central America as well as Mexicans — in some cases, people in positions of authority — say, "Why doesn't the United States just send the U.S. Marines in there and wipe these blackguards out?" And I have responded, "Why don't you make that statement publicly?" And then they give me all the reasons why they can't.

USA TODAY: Which are?

GAVIN: It would cause them political problems. It would be a contentious statement, which they would have to deal with and would rather not. In some cases, they haven't given me any reasons.

USA TODAY: How successful are the Cubans, the Russians in Nicaragua and the Sandinistas in exploiting those sentiments in Mexico?

GAVIN: In the diplomatic area, I don't really fear them, although the Russian mission in Mexico is quite large, and they have traditionally handled all of their KGB operations through them. The reason for that is they control Canada and the United States from there as well because our border is a sieve. They can meet on either side. They have large funds which they use for subsidizing the buying of media, in the sense that they buy opinion and they buy columns. That's well known. Some of them are also patriot Cubanites. So they have a continuous campaign. It's a very active one. It's one we're well aware of and see the evidence of every day.

USA TODAY: Is Mexico apt to fall like a domino to the unrest in Central America?

GAVIN: I hate to use the word domino because the domino theory phrase has been so highly commented on and in some ways so abused. Let's go back to something that Charles De Gaulle said. He called Central America "simply a prelude to Mexico." That is what is one of our great fears — the security considerations of the United States, Mexico and then to Central America. Last year, the Mexican foreign secretary told his senate that he and his colleagues feared that the situation in Central America would become so inflamed that it would overlap Mexico. So we have mutual concerns.

USA TODAY: American embassies and our diplomats around the world are visible targets for terrorists. How do you as an American ambassador live with this?

GAVIN: I think it's very important, within the embassy and in our consular sections, to do everything we can to protect our people. I'm given special protection in Mexico. But I think it's dreadful. Diplomats are emissaries of peace. After all, wars are all about diplomacy failing. It's a great shame that we have reached the situation in our world where we and our diplomats have to live in constant fear of terrorism.

USA TODAY: How are you getting along with the State Department? Does it bother you that Malcolm Toon, former ambassador to the Soviet Union, is critical of non-career diplomats?

GAVIN: What are you talking about — "Loony Toon"?

USA TODAY: No, just the idea that you were not a professional diplomat.

GAVIN: Let's talk about "Loony Toon." "Loony Toon" is a lobbyist for a union, and I can teach them a little about that. I've been president of a union. But he ought not to lie. He ought to come out and say what he is. "I'm a lobbyist for a union, and I'm trying to prevent people who are not members of my union." By the way, not all careerists at the State Department are members of a union. Some people don't want to have anything to do with the union because they're embarrassed by this kind of thing. As an example, one wonderful career ambassador, our ambassador to Panama, said a very kind thing, I thought. He said to somebody and it got back to me, "Jack Gavin is our best ambassador in Latin America." And this fellow said, "But he's not career." He said, "No, that doesn't mean he's not professional." I would like to think that I'm professional, and I would like you to find somebody who was better prepared for this job than I was.